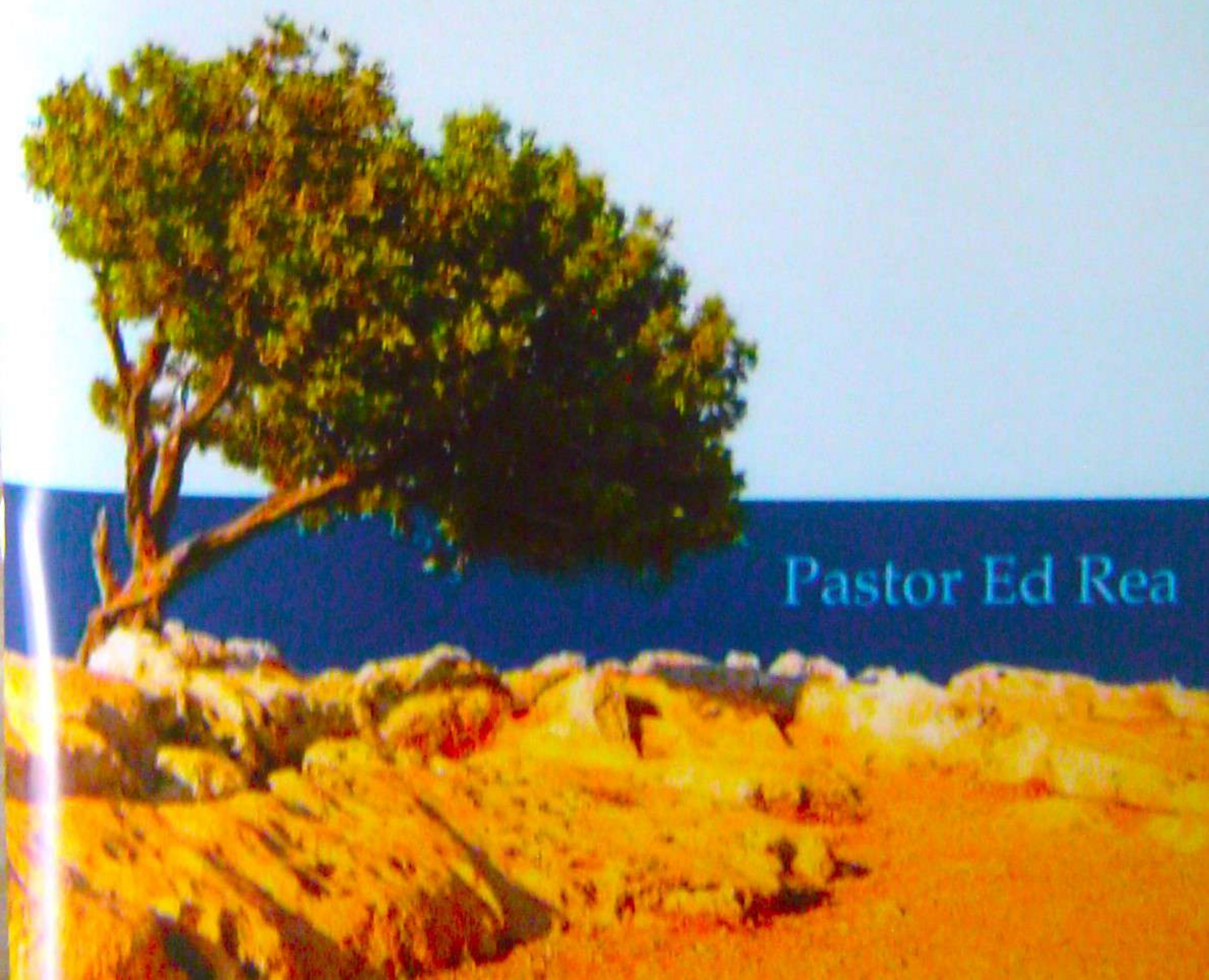


32 Devotions for Israel

Pastor Ed Rea



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32 Devotions for Israel

by
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ACTS 21:8-9: "ON THE NEXT DAY WE WHO WERE PAUL'S COMPANIONS DEPARTED AND CAME TO CAESAREA, AND ENTERED THE HOUSE OF PHILIP THE EVANGELIST, WHO WAS ONE OF THE SEVEN, AND STAYED WITH HIM. NOW THIS MAN HAD FOUR VIRGIN DAUGHTERS WHO PROPHESED."

Paul and his companions traveled to Caesarea Maritima on the beautiful Mediterranean seashore, the seat of the Roman government in Israel. Philip is the only person in Scripture who is called an evangelist, and most expositors believe that it was here, while staying with Philip, that Dr. Luke recorded what Philip had done in Acts 6 and 8 (preaching to the Samaritians and to the Ethiopian eunuch reading the Book of Isaiah). We notice that Philip was a successful parent as his four daughters were filled with the Holy Spirit and had all received the gift of prophecy. According to the early church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, "the daughters lived to a great age and were highly esteemed."

After our own personal service to God, raising our kids to serve Him is the next most important job the Lord has given us. We are not only to teach them on Sunday about the Lord, but we are to live out our faith daily before them in such a way that they cannot but learn how to live life for Him. Even if you do not have children

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by birth, every believer should be involved in the lives of the children around them, being an influence for the Lord in their lives.

I love the simple but insightful story of parenting by a former major league baseball superstar. One day when he was a boy, he, his friends, and his father were out in their yard playing baseball. They played there regularly and the grass had really taken a beating as a result. It didn't look very good anymore, unless you were a kid looking for a great place to play baseball. But this day, as the kids and the father were playing and having a great time, the boy's mother leaned out the window and called, "Can't you guys find somewhere else to play? You're killing the grass." The husband paused and then answered his wife, "Honey, we aren't raising grass, we're raising kids."

"LORD, help us to pass on to the next generation a love for You and Your word."

1 KINGS 18:21: "AND ELIJAH CAME TO ALL THE PEOPLE, AND SAID, 'HOW LONG WILL YOU FALTER BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS? IF THE LORD IS GOD, FOLLOW HIM; BUT IF BAAL, FOLLOW HIM.' BUT THE PEOPLE ANSWERED HIM NOT A WORD."

During King Ahab's reign, Baal worship reached new heights. His wife Jezebel had "massacred the prophets of the Lord" (1 Kings 18:4) and put in their place 850 heathen prophets of Baal and Asherah. Ahab's servant Obadiah had hidden 100 prophets in caves. And there was also the prophet Elijah, who God had preserved. Elijah was a highly unusual, totally sold out man of God. He marched to a different drummer. He knew what he stood for and had a strong sense of purpose. He wasn't moved by peer pressure but was committed, uncompromising, firm, and assured.

Because of Ahab and the people of Israel's idol worship, it had not rained for over three years in the land. But at the end of those three years, the Lord told Elijah to go to Ahab and that it would rain. So Elijah, 1 man, challenged the 450 prophets of Baal to offer a sacrifice on Mount Caramel. They would call on their gods, while he would call on God; and they would see whether God or Baal would answer with fire. The prophets of Baal tried for hours to call upon their gods, but there was no answer. Then Elijah drenched his sacrifice

in water and called on the Lord. Fire came from heaven and consumed the sacrifice, the stone altar, the dust, and even the water. And afterwards it rained.

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The prophets of Baal probably thought of themselves as progressives who were throwing off the restraints of a repressive society. But they were in fact, deeply committed to immorality and were leading the whole nation into moral decay. The people of Israel were a halting, stumbling multitude as they faltered between two very different world views. If asked, they no doubt would have said they believed in the God of Israel; but all of them were bowing their knees to false gods. Their devotion was mixed—diluted—making them wishy-washy and unsteady. They had no solid commitment to either God Almighty or the many man-made material gods. They were committed to nothing and therefore open to everything, which is why Elijah challenged them (and us) to choose whether they would follow God or Baal.

To falter between two opinions literally means, "to limp along on or between two twigs." Elijah's challenge today is still uncomfortable but awesome because it speaks so clearly to the church around the world. So many are trying to play both sides of the fence, keeping a foot in both worlds.

"LORD, we choose You again this day, no compromise, no turning back, no hopping back and forth between You and the world."

EZEKIEL 38:23: "THUS I
WILL MAGNIFY MYSELF AND
SANCTIFY MYSELF, AND
I WILL BE KNOWN IN THE
EYES OF MANY NATIONS. THEN
THEY SHALL KNOW THAT I AM
THE LORD."

In the Last Days, a nation called Magog (who according to the Greeks and Josephus, are people who dwell north of the Black Sea) along with others, will attack Israel after God's people are "brought back . . . gathered from many people" (Eze. 38:8). But God will intervene on His people's behalf and will display His awesome power in so many obvious ways that the world will not be able to deny that He is the Lord God.

This verse was originally given to the people of Judah, to encourage those who were in exile and had seen their capital and temple destroyed by the Babylonians. It was then and is today a reminder that the sovereign and almighty God is not only in control of the future but also of everything that is occurring right now. This definitely impacts us today, as we ponder the possibility of these verses being fulfilled in our contemporary setting.

In this modern world, with almost instantaneous news reports coming in from all over the globe, it is very easy to become fearful. The people of the earth seem to be constantly moving from one financial crisis to another. More efficient weapons

of warfare continue to be developed in our own country as well as in unstable nations around the earth. How shall we then live? God gives us reassuring words to help us keep our eyes on Him. Through the prophet Isaiah, He said:

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Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel,
And his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
"I am the First and I am the Last;
Besides Me there is no God.
And who can proclaim as I do?
Then let him declare it and set it in order
for Me,
Since I appointed the ancient people.
And the things that are coming and
shall come,
Let them show these to them.
Do not fear, nor be afraid;
Have I not told you from that time, and
declared it?
You are My witnesses.
Is there a God besides Me?
Indeed there is no other Rock;
I know not one." (Isa. 44:6-8)

"LORD, we are Your witnesses, and there is no other God like You. Help us to walk faithfully and confidently with You through this battered and buffeted world this day, in Jesus' name."

JOHN 1:45-46: "PHILIP FOUND NATHANIEL AND SAID TO HIM, 'WE HAVE FOUND HIM OF WHOM MOSES IN THE LAW, AND ALSO THE PROPHETS, WROTE—JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE SON OF JOSEPH.' AND NATHANIEL SAID TO HIM, 'CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME OUT OF NAZARETH?' PHILIP SAID TO HIM, 'COME AND SEE.'"

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, the Apostle Philip incorrectly identified Him as "the son of Joseph." While Philip's theology was not quite correct, he was certainly trying to introduce someone to Jesus. Part of the message here is that God doesn't require us to be theologically perfect before we can be used by Him. Isn't that encouraging? God is much more concerned with our hearts, than our brains. Are you excited about Jesus? Great! Then go and tell someone what He's done in your life.

Notice that Philip was also wise in the way he shared his faith. Nathaniel scorned Philip's statement, saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Some believe Nathaniel responded this way because he was a student of Old Testament prophecy and was pointing out that the Messiah was to come from Bethlehem. Others think Nathaniel had a very low opinion of Nazareth, because he was from a village just over the hill from it. Whatever the case, Philip gave the reluctant

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hearer the perfect answer, one we all might find useful, "Come and see." Very few people, if any, are ever argued into the kingdom of God, but many are open to being shown truths about Jesus.

There is an old, unverifiable story that illustrates this idea well. T.H. Huxley, the biologist, writer, and infamous agnostic once asked a Christian to tell him why he was a believer. The Christian hesitated, knowing Huxley could out argue him. Huxley said, "I don't want to argue with you. I just want you to tell me simply what this Jesus means to you." So the Christian did and reported that with tears in his eyes, Huxley said, "I would give my right hand if only I could believe that!" There is no physical record of Huxley ever coming to believe in God before his death, but no man knows what God might have done in his heart through that witness. We need to show the same spiritual sensitivity to those who are searching for truth.

"LORD, use us today to display Your love to someone who needs to know You."

JOHN 2:1-3: "ON THE THIRD DAY THERE WAS A WEDDING IN CANA OF GALILEE, AND THE MOTHER OF JESUS WAS THERE.

NOW BOTH JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES WERE INVITED TO THE WEDDING. AND WHEN THEY RAN OUT OF WINE, THE MOTHER OF JESUS SAID TO HIM, 'THEY HAVE NO WINE.'"

They had no wine, so Jesus made some. John goes on to tell us: "When the master of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it came from (but the servants who had drawn the water knew), the master of the feast called the bridegroom. And he said to him, 'Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. You have kept the good wine until now!'" (John 2:9-10).

There are so many aspects of Jesus' first miracle that grab our attention and leave us without scientific answers. Here God created "vintage" in a split second, while standing at a distance, and without touching the object. Just what manipulations, on the molecular level, did He perform to *adjust* the chemistry of the water to wine? How did He do that?! We won't know the answer till eternity.

But there is an element of this miracle that has a spiritual application and that is the quality of the

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wine produced by God the Son. It is fascinating that the steward of the wedding feast described this *instant* wine as being the best, and was amazed that such excellent wine was saved until the end of the feast. Of course that is the way God works in our lives as well. It is at the end of life that the best things will come to God's children. With Satan, he promises instant gratification, and then, at the end, when he has duped his victim into a stupor through pleasure, the deadly poison comes. This is what the steward of the wedding feast was expecting to come at the end, the inferior wine; so he was surprised when he found just the opposite. We will find that God has saved the very best for the end of life, just as Jesus did at the wedding feast of Galilee.

"Lord, help us to stay focused on You and to remember that being in heaven for eternity with You is the reality waiting for us at the end. Help us to live our lives walking before You, as people of integrity and grace, so that others might be blessed by You through us today."

MATTHEW 5:1-3: "AND SEEING THE MULTITUDES, HE WENT UP ON A MOUNTAIN, AND WHEN HE WAS SEATED HIS DISCIPLES CAME TO HIM. THEN HE OPENED HIS MOUTH AND TAUGHT THEM, SAYING: 'BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.'"

Early Church writers tell us that Matthew chapters 5-8 were part of a single message given by Jesus on the side of a grass-covered hill overlooking the beautiful Sea of Galilee. It is believed to be a word-for-word transcript of the message. These beatitudes (Latin for *blessed*) have rightly been called the greatest sermon ever given, and are often referred to as the "be attitudes" and not the "be doings." God is always looking at the attitude of our hearts, so it was not by accident that He began this sermon by pointing to our heart's attitude about our own spirituality.

To be "poor in spirit," means to recognize that apart from God we are lost, destitute, and spiritually bankrupt. Every person is born into this world spiritually dead. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). But we must be careful to view this from God's perspective. This "poor in spirit" does not mean to be "poor spirited" or not to have a backbone. It simply means to have a correct estimate of ourselves—that we are spiritually penniless

people. Jesus is saying that holding onto this characteristic of considering ourselves as poor in spirit is an attitude that will bring us happiness.

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Most people in our society today would argue the opposite. Conventional wisdom says, "happy are the successful, the powerful, the glamorous the rich, the famous, the aggressive, the self-reliant, and the self-confident." But it is only when we realize that we are needy and spiritually dead that we can be saved. As God said through the Prophet Isaiah:

But on this one will I look:
On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit,
And who trembles at My word (Isa. 66:2).

"Thank You, LORD, that we can only come empty handed to You this day, just like the very first day we ever came to You. We ask You to cleanse us and flow through us this day."

MARK 9:33-35: "THEN HE CAME TO CAPERNAUM. AND WHEN HE WAS IN THE HOUSE HE ASKED THEM, 'WHAT WAS IT YOU DISPUTED AMONG YOURSELVES ON THE ROAD?' BUT THEY KEPT SILENT, FOR ON THE ROAD THEY HAD DISPUTED AMONG THEMSELVES WHO WOULD BE THE GREATEST. AND HE SAT DOWN, CALLED THE TWELVE, AND SAID TO THEM, 'IF ANYONE DESIRES TO BE FIRST, HE SHALL BE LAST OF ALL AND SERVANT OF ALL.'"

The disciples' argument was along the lines of "which one of us gets to be chief of staff in Jesus' kingdom?" These arguments seem to rise up at the most inappropriate times imaginable. Jesus had just again reminded them of His coming death, but they were too busy positioning themselves for the earthly kingdom they were sure He was going to establish at any moment. They also probably wrongly thought that they were far enough away from Him that He couldn't hear them. But Jesus knew what they were talking about and His question was also a rebuke. They probably felt like kids caught with their hands in the cookie jar, which is why they *kept silent*.

The Lord used this awkward moment to teach them something about true spiritual greatness in the kingdom of heaven. Attitudes of pride and

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power-seeking have no place in the true believer's life. The path to spiritual greatness is never paved over the backs of other people. Jesus' statement, "he shall be last of all and servant of all," must have sounded like a very strange paradox to their ears. It still sounds backwards in the world's economy today, running counter to conventional wisdom. Jeremiah said, "Are you seeking great things for yourself? Do not seek them" (Jer. 45:5).

Notice that Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be first." This implies that ambition, in and of itself, can be a good thing. We should seek to be the best our God can make us. But, if our ambition is for self-glorification and gratification, then it is coming against the kingdom of God. Jesus wasn't criticizing the desire to be first, but He did carefully define what it meant to be first. If we are seeking first His Kingdom and righteousness and seeking to be great in our usefulness to Him, then we are ambitious for a worthy thing. We are to become others-centered—servants to others. Contrary to both the first century and the twenty-first century, it is not how many serve us, but how many we serve.

"LORD, we desire to be useful servants in Your kingdom. Please show us others who need us to serve them, and then bless our lives so we can be a blessing to them."

JOHN 21:17: "HE SAID TO HIM THE THIRD TIME, 'SIMON, SON OF JONAH, DO YOU LOVE ME?' PETER WAS GRIEVED BECAUSE HE SAID TO HIM THE THIRD TIME, 'DO YOU LOVE ME?' AND HE SAID TO HIM, 'LORD, YOU KNOW ALL THINGS; YOU KNOW THAT I LOVE YOU.' JESUS SAID TO HIM, 'FEED MY SHEEP.'"

Notice that Jesus called him Simon, not Peter. Jesus hadn't called him Simon since they first met. We remember that He had changed his name from Simon to Peter because *Simon* means "tiny rocks" or "sand particles" or "shifting sand." Whereas *Peter* means "rock." When Jesus first met Simon and changed his name, He was saying to him that he would become a solid, unmovable rock; however, at this moment, he was back to being simply Simon the "sand." As some have humorously commented, Peter was no longer named Rocky but Pebbles.

Jesus asked Peter to compare his love for Him with something. In Matthew 26:33, before Peter denied Christ, he claimed a superior love, saying, "Even if all are made to stumble . . . I will never be made to stumble." So here, after he had stumbled, the question was did he still have a proud estimation of his own devotion? Jesus asked about *agape* love, which is an all-giving, unselfish love. Peter answered using the Greek word

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phileo love, which is a lesser reciprocating, friendly affection. Peter wasn't quite as self-confident as he had been earlier. The third time Jesus asked, "Do you love me?" He used that lesser Greek word *phileo*, meaning, "Peter, do you love me affectionately?"

Giving Peter a chance to affirm his love three times, after he had denied Jesus three times, gives a clear picture of the heart of our Savior. As the hymn writer said so well, "How great the Father's love for us."

"We thank You, LORD, for Your great love displayed on the cross for us and displayed so clearly in this story. We want to walk in Your love this day."

MATTHEW 14:15-16: "WHEN IT WAS EVENING, HIS DISCIPLES CAME TO HIM, SAYING, 'THIS IS A DESERTED PLACE, AND THE HOUR IS ALREADY LATE. SEND THE MULTITUDES AWAY, THAT THEY MAY GO INTO THE VILLAGES AND BUY THEMSELVES FOOD.' BUT JESUS SAID TO THEM, 'THEY DO NOT NEED TO GO AWAY. YOU GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO EAT.'"

This chapter records what had been a very long day in the ministry of Jesus. He had received word that His cousin John the Baptist had been murdered, so He tried to get away by boat to a quiet place with His disciples. But a huge crowd followed them. He was moved to compassion for them, and healed and ministered to them until evening. By this point, His disciples were tired. It was late in the day, and they were a long way from any place where they could get food. The disciples were *peopled-out* and asked Jesus to simply send the crowd away. Ironically, Jesus turned it back on them. He mildly rebuffed them, and then asked them to do something that was impossible unless God was in it. He told them, "You give them something to eat."

We understand that Jesus was testing them. He knew they didn't have anything to feed the people with, but He also knew there was a little kid there with bread and fish. True, not much time

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had passed since they had come back from their first successful ministry tour. True, they had prayed for people and preached and seen God move through them. But they weren't expecting this command from Jesus. He was telling them to feed the people, and they had little faith or desire to look to Him for a miracle.

If you have been walking with the Lord for more than a few months, you have probably experienced something similar to what the disciples were going through here. It often seems that when we go to God with a request for someone else, He ends up asking us to be His hands and feet to the very person we're praying for. And it is often a request for us to help in a way that we are not very excited about. Our bad attitudes will cloud our ability to see just what it is God is trying to do for others through us. But like in the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, if we will only be obedient, God will supply everything that is needed.

"LORD, we need You to make us obedient disciples today. We give You permission, in fact we beg You, to over-ride our short-sightedness and open the eyes of our hearts to what You want to do through us this day."

ACTS 9:5: "AND HE SAID, 'WHO ARE YOU, LORD?' THEN THE LORD SAID, 'I AM JESUS, WHOM YOU ARE PERSECUTING. IT IS HARD FOR YOU TO KICK AGAINST THE GOADS.'"

Acts 9 records the conversion of Saul, the Apostle Paul. As he was traveling to Damascus, where he intended to hunt down and kill those who were following the Lord, a light from heaven surrounded him and he fell from his horse. He heard a voice say, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4). His response is very interesting; he asked, "Who are you, Lord?" This suggests that he realized he was dealing with deity.

The second part of Jesus' statement to Saul brings a smile to our face every time we read it. Perhaps it is because it sounds so much like our own personal encounters with God: "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." It is hard on us when we try to resist God's leading. Having been an atheist scientist during the early part of my adult life, I can fully appreciate the irony here in the Lord's statement. Many of us who are believers today once spent a lot of our time struggling and kicking against God's dealings in our lives. We are certainly a headstrong, rebellious species?

No doubt the Holy Spirit had been pricking and goading Saul's conscience for a long while. Saul was bent on doing everything in his power to stop the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ and

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to arrest or kill His followers. But suddenly a blinding flash of light knocked him off his high horse. Aren't you glad that God knows how to get our attention! God showed up and interrupted Saul's plans. He let go one laser beam of light from the throne room of heaven and knocked this misguided human to the ground. In a blinding flash, all of the education, plans, and hatred that had been controlling him were erased. Saul, who was pursuing, suddenly became the one pursued. God Almighty had hunted down the hunter, effortlessly bringing down His prey.

Saul had known well the voice of religion, but now, for the first time, he heard the voice of relationship with God. This same voice speaks these words to each of us, "This is My will for your life; do it now." We must choose not to kick against the goads; it will only bring us frustration and pain. We need to choose now, today, to submit to God's will. If we do, then someday soon we will hear that same Voice say to us, "Well done My good and faithful servant." How we want to hear those words and that Voice clearly.

"LORD, we want to know Your voice today. Please give us ears to hear You above the noise of the crowd."

MATTHEW 17:5: "WHILE HE WAS STILL SPEAKING, BEHOLD, A BRIGHT CLOUD OVERSHADOWED THEM; AND SUDDENLY A VOICE CAME OUT OF THE CLOUD, SAYING, 'THIS IS MY BELOVED SON, IN WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED. HEAR HIM!'"

It is hard to imagine what it must have been like for Peter, James, and John—Jesus' three disciples—as He took them up on this high mountaintop to experience something much more stunning than a great view of northern Israel. Right before their eyes, Moses and Elijah appeared and Jesus was transfigured: "His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light" (Matt. 17:2). There are many amazing aspects of this moment, but the central truth of this passage jumps right out of the page at us. Jesus was presented to His disciples as the Son of God. But why was it necessary to emphasize this fact?

These two Old Testament saints, Moses and Elijah, symbolized to Peter, James, and John, the law and the prophets. They characterized what it meant to be Jewish and how Jews were to live their lives. These two appeared with Jesus, but Jesus totally eclipsed them. The voice from heaven removed any doubt as to the real purpose of this experience, "This is My beloved Son . . . Hear Him!"

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It is not the law nor the prophets nor our history that we are to look to; it is to Jesus, the Son of God. His transfiguration was a living parable that He is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). It seems so straight forward and simple, why then do so many get this wrong? Because the Jesus-way is so narrow and seemingly restrictive. "I think all roads should lead to God," many demand. And they do. All roads will eventually lead to the foot of the Great White Throne of God's final judgment. And if we "Hear Him" now, we need not fear that day.

"LORD, we choose to bow before You now and accept Your will for our lives."

1 KINGS 12:33: "SO [JEROBOAM] MADE OFFERINGS ON THE ALTAR WHICH HE HAD MADE AT BETHEL ON THE FIFTEENTH DAY OF THE EIGHTH MONTH, IN THE MONTH WHICH HE HAD DEVISED IN HIS OWN HEART. AND HE ORDAINED A FEAST FOR THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, AND OFFERED SACRIFICES ON THE ALTAR AND BURNED INCENSE."

Solomon sinned against God by going after false gods, and because of that God divided the kingdom between Rehoboam (Solomon's son) and Jeroboam (Solomon's servant, from the tribe of Ephraim). Judah and Benjamin remained under Rehoboam's rule, while the other ten tribes were given to Jeroboam. God made the same promise to Jeroboam that He had made to Solomon; that if Jeroboam would walk in God's ways, then God would bless him.

All the people of Israel were to come to the temple in Jerusalem three times a year to offer the sacrifices God required. But because Jerusalem was under Rehoboam's rule, Jeroboam was afraid he would lose the allegiance of his people if they went to Jerusalem. Jeroboam decided it was safer for him to appoint men, who were not from the family of Levi (as God had commanded), to serve as priests in the northern kingdom. He also made two golden calves and set them up

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as the people's gods, thus falling into the very same sin as Solomon. He forgot that he was not king because of his own efforts or ability, but because God wanted him to be king. It's amazing how quickly Jeroboam forgot that promise.

We read in 2 Chronicles 11:13–17 that after Jeroboam rejected the Levitical priests, who refused to have any part of Jeroboam's unscriptural altars and false worship, they left their homes and went south to Rehoboam's territory so they could worship God as He had commanded. But the majority of the people stayed and worshiped these gods of convenience, the golden calves. It wasn't convenient for Jeroboam to trust God with the situation or the security of his kingship, so he took matters into his own hands.

We need to consider this lesson carefully. Whatever God gives to us, He will see to it that we keep it. By the same token, whatever we take for ourselves, God can take away and give to others. God desires to bless our lives today, but He expects us to hold those blessings lightly. We should never latch on to them, doing anything we have to in order to keep them. Jeroboam did not learn to keep the Lord as the Master of his life, and he choked by grabbing the control for himself. And in doing so, he caused everyone around him to sin also.

"LORD, we choose to lay everything we have at Your feet again today. It all belongs to You anyway, doesn't it?!"

1 SAMUEL 31:5: "AND WHEN HIS ARMOR BEARER SAW THAT SAUL WAS DEAD, HE ALSO FELL ON HIS SWORD, AND DIED WITH HIM."

The terrible, immediate result of King Saul's suicide was its influence on his young armor bearer, who followed Saul's example and fell into the same sin. In this chapter we are left to assume that Saul was successful in his suicide. However, in 2 Samuel 1, we are told that Saul was not yet dead. A young Amalekite came to David with Saul's crown, bracelet, and a story of how the king was leaning on his sword near death, but his life was still lingering. According to his story, Saul begged him to come near and kill him, and the young man obliged.

Suicide always presents a struggle for those left behind, as they have to wrestle with the many *what-if* questions that are left unanswered. We believe that suicide is both the ultimate act of selfishness and Satan's ultimate trap. The person takes matters into their own hands, making a choice that God has not given authority to any person to make. This self-directed act of final control comes after a thought process along the lines of "I can't control anything else around me; so I'll take control of it all, by shutting it all off." How important it is for any person caught in this kind of thinking to go to someone in their life they trust, like a teacher, good friend, or relative, and tell them.

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ACT OF
FAITHFULNESS

Saul's suicide is the final expression of his faithlessness toward God. He should have called on God and fought on or at least surrendered, trusting God to get him through. David himself would later write the solution in Psalm 55:22: "Cast your burden on the LORD, / And He shall sustain you; / He shall never permit the righteous to be moved." When David wrote this he was depressed, having been betrayed by a close friend as well as having his own son seize his throne. Even though David was struggling, he recognized the only solution was to turn it over to God. By pushing our burdens or difficulties in life onto the Lord, we commit the ultimate act of faithfulness. We are saying that we trust God to give us the grace to get us through the struggle in front of us. And God will uphold the believer, giving the grace to persevere through the most difficult trials. Mountains will come into everyone's life, but if we will submit and place our burdens at the foot of the cross, Jesus will either remove the mountain or give us the strength to climb over it.

"LORD, You are the One we turn our burdens over to this day."

JUDGES 7:7-8: "THEN THE LORD SAID TO GIDEON, 'BY THE THREE HUNDRED MEN WHO LAPPED I WILL SAVE YOU, AND DELIVER THE MIDIANITES INTO YOUR HAND. LET ALL THE OTHER PEOPLE GO, EVERY MAN TO HIS PLACE.' SO THE PEOPLE TOOK PROVISIONS AND THEIR TRUMPETS IN THEIR HANDS. AND HE SENT AWAY ALL THE REST OF ISRAEL, EVERY MAN TO HIS TENT, AND RETAINED THOSE THREE HUNDRED MEN. NOW THE CAMP OF MIDIAN WAS BELOW HIM IN THE VALLEY."

God assured Gideon of victory with this sweeping statement, "I will save you and deliver the Midianites into your hand." Gideon needed to hear that at this point because the odds against him and his men were about 450:1. Gideon had been painted into such a corner that all he could do was trust in God and God alone. We know that feeling in our own lives spiritually.

It is difficult to truly rely on God when we have all the human resources needed already available. It is so much easier, in our natural mind, to use available human resources and then "give God the credit" for what follows. But what about the situations where nothing can happen spiritually unless God interferes? That is when faith is challenged and we must make a decision to trust God

PRESSURE
BRINGS
USEFULNESS
IN SERVICE

to supply. Job said it this way: "But [God] knows the way that I take; When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). He was saying something like, "I don't know where God is taking me or exactly how He is working, but He does and that is all that matters."

Job realized that pressure brings usefulness in service, "when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold." A three dollar length of bright stainless steel can be pounded into a couple of ten dollar horseshoes. With further pounding that steel can become one hundred dollars worth of guitar strings. And with even further pounding, it can become one thousand dollars worth of men's fine wristwatch cases and mechanisms. It all depends on how much pounding is done! If you feel like you're being hammered, hang in there; don't give up; don't fret yourself into depression. Don't struggle with where God is taking you, or what He is doing. When all was said and done, Gideon found himself used by God to change the course of a nation.

"LORD, use us today in whatever place You need us, large or small."

2 KINGS 5:13-14: "AND [NAAMAN'S] SERVANTS CAME NEAR AND SPOKE TO HIM, AND SAID, 'MY FATHER, IF THE PROPHET HAD TOLD YOU TO DO SOMETHING GREAT, WOULD YOU NOT HAVE DONE IT? HOW MUCH MORE THEN, WHEN HE SAYS TO YOU, 'WASH, AND BE CLEAN'?' SO HE WENT DOWN AND DIPPED SEVEN TIMES IN THE JORDAN, ACCORDING TO THE SAYING OF THE MAN OF GOD; AND HIS FLESH WAS RESTORED LIKE THE FLESH OF A LITTLE CHILD, AND HE WAS CLEAN."

Naaman, the commander of the Syrian army, was a leper. He came to Israel seeking healing, and the prophet Elisha told him to go and wash in the Jordan River. Naaman didn't like that command. His servants took a risk speaking with him since he was "in a rage," but it seems they loved and trusted him. The logic of their gentle question is beautiful and should be applied to each of our lives as well. They were saying, "If you had been asked to perform a great feat of courage or pay a great sum of money, would you not have done it? Surely you would have been willing to cross a rushing river or a perilous gorge, or even wrestle a bear or lion, empty handed. So if you would be willing to do something great, why not something simple?"

WE NEED
TO TRUST
IN THE
WORD OF
GOD AND
THE
PROMISES
OF GOD
THIS DAY

If God would just tell us to do some great thing in order to be cleansed from our sin, like build a hospital for the poor, feed ten thousand starving orphans, or walk three thousand miles, we would be more than willing. There is something within every human being that drives us to want to *earn* forgiveness, and that something is pride. We want to do it our way. Naaman had his own ideas of how his healing should be accomplished. If he was just going to be asked to wash in a river, why not the rivers of Syria instead of the old, muddy Jordan River? The better question would have been, "Why not simply do it God's way?" Naaman's servants logically presented the argument of nothing ventured nothing gained. Naaman wisely let their counsel prevail, and he came up out of the water healed.

Scripture is filled with many exciting things that God has done because someone dared to venture out in faith and trust God's word. Even though sometimes it doesn't make sense, why not give it a try? Who knows what God might want to do? Today may offer you a golden opportunity to become God's instrument to change world events. Why not step out and try a venture in faith? We need to trust in the word of God and the promises of God this day. It is always exciting to make ourselves available to God for His purposes and become part of His answer for the world.

"LORD, please give us the courage to do and say whatever You ask of us, in Jesus' name."

ZECHARIAH 14:4A: "AND IN
THAT DAY HIS FEET WILL
STAND ON THE MOUNT OF
OLIVES, / WHICH FACES
JERUSALEM ON THE EAST. / AND
THE MOUNT OF OLIVES SHALL
BE SPLIT IN TWO, / FROM
EAST TO WEST "

We love the phrase "living waters". It originally meant flowing water like from a spring or water-fall rather than stale water that had been collected in a cistern. Someday soon, pure, fresh flowing water will run from Jerusalem in two directions. Part of the spring will flow east toward the now Dead Sea, and the other part will flow west to the Mediterranean Sea. It seems it will run continually for a thousand years and not dry up, making the desert "blossom as the rose" (Isa. 35:1) even in summer. The living water mentioned here isn't just flowing, it is also bringing life.

In the early 1500s, not long after the discovery of the New World, Europeans began making the long journey across the Atlantic Ocean. Some came in search of prosperity, others for adventure, to see what other Europeans had not. Later some sought religious freedom, but at first, the people who came were mostly in search of gold. Perhaps the most famous was Juan Ponce de Leon, a Spanish conquistador. Ponce de Leon and his men were the first Europeans to explore Puerto Rico, parts of Mexico, and Florida. In his quest for gold, he meet with the indigenous tribes in those

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LIVING
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areas, who told him stories not only of gold but also of a magical spring, the "Fountain of Youth," that bubbled up out of the ground and had the power to heal and restore youth to anyone who drank from it. He spent the rest of his life trying to find this fountain, but when he died from a poisoned arrow in 1521, he still had not discovered this "living water." Not much has changed in the twenty-first century; people are still looking for some fountain of youth. They have their faces lifted and their bellies suctioned. They are perpetually dieting, joining health clubs, getting personal trainers, and doing exercise videos. There is a whole "fountain-of-youth" industry today.

Almost fifteen centuries before Ponce de Leon, a Samaritan woman came to her local well, not searching for a fountain of youth but for just enough water to get her through another day. We are not told how old she was, but we can easily see that she was very old emotionally and spiritually. Selfish people, life, and sin had used her up. Her story in John 4 records her encounter with the Messiah and His offer of living water. She gratefully accepted the free gift of eternal life that Jesus offered her and still offers to all who come to Him today.

"LORD, we are so grateful for Your living water and ask that You would use us to spread the word this day, in Jesus' name."

JOHN 18:5-6: "THEY ANSWERED HIM, 'JESUS OF NAZARETH.' JESUS SAID TO THEM, 'I AM HE.' AND JUDAS, WHO BETRAYED HIM, ALSO STOOD WITH THEM. NOW WHEN HE SAID TO THEM, 'I AM HE,' THEY DREW BACK AND FELL TO THE GROUND."

You have to love this passage, and when you get to heaven, you'll definitely want to check out this video. Jesus' reply of, "I am He," is truly fascinating. Notice that the word "He" is in italic. That means that the Bible translators added this word for clarity. But as is often the case, this addition is not very helpful, and in a way, obscures an important declaration Jesus was making. In the Greek this is *ego emi* which does mean "I am," but more specifically this is the Greek form of God's name given by Him to Moses at the burning bush.

In Exodus 3, Moses basically asked God, "What is Your name?" God answered with this mysterious, obscure sounding statement, "I AM" (Ex. 3:14). But upon closer inspection the statement is a wonder-filled promise of just who and what God wants to be in all our lives. Some translators have rendered it: "the becoming one," others: "the self-existent one." But quite simply God was saying, "I am for you anything needed." John carefully recorded for us seven classic "I AM" statements that Jesus made before this one in the garden:

WHAT
PROBLEM
COULD WE
FACE TODAY
THAT IS
TOO LARGE
FOR THE
GREAT
I AM

"I am the bread of life" (John 6:35).
"I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).
"I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7).
"I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11).
"I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).
"I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).
"I am the true vine" (John 15:1).

To the disciples in the midst of the storm at sea, He calmed their fears when He came walking on the water, and said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid" (John 6:20). What He was saying literally was, "*I am*, do not be afraid." Again to His enemies, making it clear who He really was claiming to be, He said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58).

It should put a smile on our face every time we read, "they drew back and fell to the ground." This is a small glimpse of the awesome power that was compressed into human flesh. Jesus' answer, "I am" was so filled with majestic authority that they could not stand in His presence, but toppled over backward to the ground. What a vivid reminder that even in that dark hour, Jesus held ultimate power over His enemies and the powers of darkness. Jesus bears the divine name; therefore, what problem could we face today that is too large for the great I Am?

"Nothing is too hard for You, LORD. Lead us in Your path for us this day. We trust in You."

JOHN 7:14,37-38: "NOW ABOUT THE MIDDLE OF THE FEAST JESUS WENT UP INTO THE TEMPLE AND TAUGHT . . . ON THE LAST DAY, THAT GREAT DAY OF THE FEAST, JESUS STOOD AND CRIED OUT, SAYING, 'IF ANYONE THIRSTS, LET HIM COME TO ME AND DRINK. HE WHO BELIEVES IN ME, AS THE SCRIPTURE HAS SAID, OUT OF HIS HEART WILL FLOW RIVERS OF LIVING WATER.'"

A few centuries before Jesus came, a tradition developed that on the seventh day of the Feast of Tabernacles, the High Priest would carry a golden container filled with water from the Pool of Siloam back to the temple in a procession. As the pageant came to the Water Gate, on the south side of the inner temple court, three trumpet blasts were sounded, reminding the people of the joy of the occasion. Following the blasts, the crowd would recite Isaiah 12:3: "Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." Back at the temple, the priests would march around the altar with the container of water, while the temple choir sang Psalm 113 through Psalm 118. Then the water was poured out as a sacrifice to God at nine o'clock in the morning, the time of the morning sacrifice.

So when Jesus stood in the center of Jerusalem, on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, and

IF ANYONE
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ABOUT
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WITH HIM,
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"COME TO
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DRINK

made this stirring proclamation: "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink," it held significant meaning to all who heard it. By saying, "if anyone thirsts," Jesus meant, if anyone wants to "draw water from the wells of salvation," if anyone thirsts for truth about God, about having a relationship with Him, then they should "come to [Him] and drink." Jesus used this event as an object lesson and opportunity to make a very public invitation for His people to accept Him as the living water that the tradition had been pointing to for so many centuries.

We of course understand that Jesus was the fulfillment the Feast of Tabernacles anticipated. He is the Messiah, who provides living water, which gives eternal life. The promise is that after we have taken Jesus in, then "out of [our hearts] will flow rivers of living water" to others. We become a conduit for the living water Jesus wants to give to a thirsty world.

"LORD, make us this day a channel and instrument of Your living water to the thirsty world around us."

1 CHRONICLES 15:1,25: "DAVID BUILT HOUSES FOR HIMSELF IN THE CITY OF DAVID; AND HE PREPARED A PLACE FOR THE ARK OF GOD, AND PITCHED A TENT FOR IT . . . SO DAVID, THE ELDERS OF ISRAEL, AND THE CAPTAINS OVER THOUSANDS WENT TO BRING UP THE ARK OF THE COVENANT OF THE LORD FROM THE HOUSE OF OBED-EDOM WITH JOY."

David had tried to bring the ark into Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 13), but he hadn't followed the Lord's commandments on how to transport it properly. After three months, David attempted it again, this time the right way. We need to stop every now and then and think about the last time we were given a second chance. When was that? How about that time you got pulled over for speeding but the cop let you go? Or when you should have been charged that late fee but the store let it go? Or maybe it was the last time you came to the foot of the cross and asked Jesus to forgive you of your sins. That is where second chances, or forgiveness, really come into play in our lives, and joy quickly follows. That's what David was experiencing when he was dancing in public as the ark entered the city.

Do you struggle to believe that you can have a second chance? The Bible is filled with stories of men and women who experienced God's forgiveness

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CHANCE

as He gave them a second chance, a third, a fourth, and so on and so on. There is a great story from when Thomas Edison was working on his crazy new contraption, the "light bulb." After discovering that carbonized cotton thread worked as a filament, it took a whole team of men twenty-four straight hours to put one together. When Edison finished the bulb, he handed it to a young boy who nervously carried it up the stairs. Step-by-step the boy cautiously watched his hands, frightened he might drop the priceless piece of work. But, in spite of his care, at the very top of the stairs, he dropped it. It took the men another twenty-four hours to make a new bulb. Finally, tired and ready for a break, Edison finished. He turned and handed the second bulb, to be again carried up the stairs, to the very same boy who had dropped the first one. That's true forgiveness.

"Thank You, LORD, for Your heart of forgiveness, open to all who will humble themselves before You."

JOHN 9:1-2: "NOW AS JESUS PASSED BY, HE SAW A MAN WHO WAS BLIND FROM BIRTH. AND HIS DISCIPLES ASKED HIM, SAYING, 'RABBI, WHO SINNED, THIS MAN OR HIS PARENTS, THAT HE WAS BORN BLIND?'"

The healing of this blind man is very unique in that there are five miracles of the blind being healed, but this is the only one where the person healed was blind from birth. Jesus healed this man both physically and spiritually. However most of the story is about the religious leaders reaction to the miracle. There is a lot of symbolism about spiritual blindness in this record, as this blind man certainly was not the only *blind* person in this chapter. At the end of the chapter Jesus said:

"For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind." Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, "Are we blind also?" Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains." (John 9:39-41)

Jesus was saying that being spiritually blind is not the worst sin in the world. But thinking that you can get along fine without Jesus, that is the one sin that will keep a person from salvation. These religious leaders were leading people into darkness, not into light. Their hearts had become hardened

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like rocks. They had become so smug and sure of themselves that they were not able to recognize God the Son when He was right in front of them.

The truth is every person is born into this world spiritually blind. We *all* need the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to the truth and reality of Jesus Christ. We *all* have blind spots, presumptions, and perceptions that we don't think need changing. These blind spots are major roadblocks in our spiritual journey. When we find ourselves skeptical, judgmental, fearful, or filled with religious pride, then we have a spiritual blind spot that needs Jesus' healing touch. Believing is seeing more and more spiritual truth as we become conformed more and more into His image.

"LORD, open our spiritual eyes to see what it is that You want to heal in us today."

MICAH 5:2: "BUT YOU, BETHLEHEM
EPHRATHAH / THOUGH YOU ARE
LITTLE AMONG THE THOUSANDS
OF JUDAH, / YET OUT OF YOU
SHALL COME FORTH TO ME /
THE ONE TO BE RULER IN
ISRAEL, / WHOSE GOINGS
FORTH HAVE BEEN FROM OF
OLD, / FROM EVERLASTING."

This verse, which was written centuries before the Messiah came, clearly predicted that the eternal God would burst into time in the tiny village of Bethlehem. The scribes and Jewish leadership correctly quoted this verse to King Herod in Matthew 2, when he asked them for the birthplace of the Messiah. The Magi had come seeking the newborn King, and based on this verse, Herod sent them to Bethlehem. It is mind boggling to think that everyone in Jerusalem received the correct information about the Messiah's arrival, but few cared enough to be bothered to seek Him. People have not changed very much in that regard in almost two thousand years!

When Micah foretold the birthplace of Jesus, he emphasized how insignificant the small town was to the rest of the world. Jesus was not born in a politically, commercially, culturally, educationally, or socially significant city. Nor was He born into a house of royalty, riches, or celebrity. The One who would be called "The Bread of Life" was born in a tiny, village called Bethlehem, which means "The House of Bread."

JESUS
WANTS TO
GIVE US
THE GIFT
OF ETERNAL
LIFE IN
EXCHANGE
FOR OUR
SINS

Jerome, an early church father who was part of translating the Bible from Greek into Latin, the language of the people of his day, lived part of his life in Bethlehem. One night he had a dream that Jesus visited him. He tried to give Jesus all his money, but Jesus said, "I do not want your money." Next he tried to give Jesus all his possessions, but Jesus said, "I do not want your things." "Then what can I give you, Jesus? What do you want?" Jerome asked the Lord. "Give me your sins," Jesus answered. "I came to take away your sins. Give them to me." Jesus wants to give us the gift of eternal life in exchange for our sins. Now that is an offer no sane person can refuse.

"Thank You, LORD, for coming and dying in the great exchange of Your life for ours. Please use us in Your kingdom this day."

1 SAMUEL 17:28-29: "NOW ELIAB HIS OLDEST BROTHER HEARD WHEN HE SPOKE TO THE MEN; AND ELIAB'S ANGER WAS AROUSED AGAINST DAVID, AND HE SAID, 'WHY DID YOU COME DOWN HERE? AND WITH WHOM HAVE YOU LEFT THOSE FEW SHEEP IN THE WILDERNESS? I KNOW YOUR PRIDE AND THE INSOLENCE OF YOUR HEART, FOR YOU HAVE COME DOWN TO SEE THE BATTLE.' AND DAVID SAID, 'WHAT HAVE I DONE NOW? IS THERE NOT A CAUSE?'"

It sounds like David's older brother was still feeling the sting of rejection because God had chosen his *little* brother over him to rule the nation. He was also being a typical older brother, expecting and accusing David of the worst. He was basically saying, "You just came to see blood and guts. Why don't you just go home, smart mouth?" And David gave a typical younger brother's response: "Now what did I do?" David's feelings might have been hurt, but he refused to be hindered by his brother's misunderstanding of his motive. When David heard of Saul's reward to the man who beat Goliath, David spoke and thought about who God is and what God can do. Instead of seeing it as an opportunity to glorify himself, he only saw it as an opportunity to glorify God.

[DAVID]
WAS MORE
CONCERNED
WITH GOD'S
CAUSE AND
OPINION
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WITH
ANYONE
ELSE'S

Can we handle criticism and misunderstanding as well as David did? How thick is our skin? Someone said years ago that serving God requires two things. First we need a heart the size of an elephant, and, secondly, we need skin as thick as a rhinoceros. How was David able to handle this criticism so well? He was more concerned with God's cause and opinion than with anyone else's. David got the same reaction when he later volunteered to fight Goliath. Saul said, "You can't fight this Philistine, you're only a boy." However, despite all the flack, David did not give up. He insisted that he be given a chance to take on the giant.

When Robert Fulton, inventor of the steamboat, first presented his new invention, there were reportedly many critics crowded on the riverbank yelling, "It'll never work; it'll never even start." After a lot of tinkering and clanking, Fulton proved them wrong as the steamboat finally started moving down the river. The critics were momentarily quieted but quickly recovered and started yelling, "It'll never make it; it will never be able to stop." We will be criticized as we walk with the Lord; so we need to follow the example of David and Robert Fulton. We can't let it hold us back; we need to use it by applying it and growing from it.

"LORD, help us today to seize the opportunities You place before us and not be slowed down by the critics."

JUDGES 13:5: "FOR BEHOLD, YOU SHALL CONCEIVE AND BEAR A SON. AND NO RAZOR SHALL COME UPON HIS HEAD, FOR THE CHILD SHALL BE A NAZIRITE TO GOD FROM THE WOMB; AND HE SHALL BEGIN TO DELIVER ISRAEL OUT OF THE HAND OF THE PHILISTINES."

The Hebrew word *Nazarite* means to separate and the conditions of that separation are explained in Numbers 6. Someone who took this vow was to abstain from anything that came from the vine, have no contact with a dead body, and not have their hair cut. In Samson's case, he was to be a Nazarite to God all his life. The angel also said that his mother should not drink wine or eat from the vine or touch any unclean thing. Samson was not only chosen to be a Nazirite, but he was also called to deliver Israel from their enemies, the Philistines.

These Philistine neighbors were used by God as a thorn in the lives of Israel because Israel would not listen to Him. They are also a picture for us today, as an illustration of the flesh taking over from the Spirit in our walk with God. It happens when we start to live in sin; it traps us like a thorn in our side. The thorn irritates us, stealing our peace, joy, and the love we want.

Samson was chosen, but God does not pick men merely to be spiritual robots. God indwells them

[SIN]
TRAPS US
LIKE A
THORN IN
OUR SIDE

and empowers them to choose between depending on their sinful nature or His Holy Spirit. Samson had everything good in front of him at this point in his young life. He had potential, promise, destiny, and God's hand directing him. What more could a person ask for? In many ways this is our life at this moment too. God has given to each of us the potential to be a man or woman of God. He has promised to never leave or forsake us and to protect us. Each of us who has surrendered to Him has a destiny to spend eternity with God. And finally we have God's hand directing our lives toward things that will spiritually benefit those around us.

"LORD, keep us in the center of Your will this day that we might be everything You desire us to be."

PSALM 74:2: "REMEMBER YOUR CONGREGATION, WHICH YOU HAVE PURCHASED OF OLD, / THE TRIBE OF YOUR INHERITANCE, WHICH YOU HAVE REDEEMED— / THIS MOUNT ZION WHERE YOU HAVE DWELT."

According to one tradition, this psalm records the destruction of the temple by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. The psalmist was asking God to not forget His people and Mount Zion, where the temple once stood, to remember His covenant with Israel, and to save His nation. If this psalm is from the Babylonian captivity, then although many cried out to God to spare them, He did not deliver them for many years. He of course hadn't forgotten them, but had prescribed seventy years of captivity to discipline them for ignoring His word.

God doesn't forget anything unless He chooses to forget. The one thing He does choose to forget is our sins, which are put away from us through confession and repentance. This is exactly what happens when we are forgiven by God. When God forgives us, He blots out our sins and forgets them, as it says in Psalm 103:12: "As far as the east is from the west, / So far has He removed our transgressions from us." The New Testament also states this: "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more" (Heb. 8:12).

WHEN GOD
FORGIVES
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THEM

When the first missionaries came to Alberta, Canada, they were greatly opposed by a young Cree Indian chief named Maskepetoon. But he later responded to the gospel and accepted Jesus Christ. Shortly afterward, a member of the Blackfoot tribe killed his father. Maskepetoon rode into the village where the murderer lived and demanded that he be brought before him. Confronting the guilty man, he said, "You have killed my father, so now *you* must be my father. You shall ride my best horse and wear my best clothes." In utter amazement and remorse, his enemy exclaimed, "My son, now you have killed me!" He meant, of course, that the hate in his own heart had been completely erased by the forgiveness and kindness of this chief.

"Father God, You have killed us by Your kindness and forgiveness through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to live well today for You and Your kingdom."

EZEKIEL 37:1,3-5: "THE HAND OF THE LORD CAME UPON ME AND BROUGHT ME OUT IN THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD, AND SET ME DOWN IN THE MIDST OF THE VALLEY; AND IT WAS FULL OF BONES . . . AND HE SAID TO ME, 'SON OF MAN, CAN THESE BONES LIVE?' SO I ANSWERED, 'O LORD GOD, YOU KNOW.' AGAIN HE SAID TO ME, 'PROPHECY TO THESE BONES, AND SAY TO THEM, "O DRY BONES, HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD! THUS SAYS THE LORD GOD TO THESE BONES: 'SURELY I WILL CAUSE BREATH TO ENTER INTO YOU, AND YOU SHALL LIVE.'"

God showed His prophet Ezekiel a vision of a valley filled with dry bones and asked him, "Can these bones live?" This was God's pledge to someday soon restore His people and the nation of Israel to life and spiritual regeneration. Of course had it been any other person asking the question, the answer would obviously have been *of course not*, but Ezekiel remembered who was asking and he gave a wise answer. This man of God recognized that nothing is out of the question with God, the God of the impossible.

This question is still a fascinating one for us today. In fact God asks every one of us, as His

WHEN
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OUR
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[GOD]
BEGINS
TO WORK

servants, to speak to dead men and women every day. Every time we care enough for the soul of an unbeliever to share the love of God with them, we are talking to dead men. According to the Apostle Paul, we also were once dead men and women: "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were *dead* in trespasses, made us *alive* together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)," (Eph. 2:4-5, *italics added*).

God has prepared good works for each of us (Eph 2:10), so now that we are alive and saved, we take steps of faith to share His love with others. Is it awkward? Yes, but when we are obedient and open our mouths, He begins to work. He alone can bring a person to salvation, but He clearly states that it is His desire that we would share the good news of the dead being made alive with the many people surrounding us every day. So when we see someone walking down the sidewalk toward us today, we should not be surprised if we hear the voice of God speak a question to our hearts: "Son of man, can these bones live?" And our response should be as wise as the prophet Ezekiel's was almost 2600 years ago, "O Lord God, You know."

"LORD, we are eternally grateful for the salvation You have purchased for us, so we go in obedience and speak to dead men this day of Your love, in Jesus' name."

1 SAMUEL 24:11-12:
 "MOREOVER, MY FATHER, SEE!
 YES, SEE THE CORNER OF
 YOUR ROBE IN MY HAND! FOR
 IN THAT I CUT OFF THE CORNER
 OF YOUR ROBE, AND DID NOT
 KILL YOU, KNOW AND SEE THAT
 THERE IS NEITHER EVIL NOR
 REBELLION IN MY HAND, AND
 I HAVE NOT SINNED AGAINST
 YOU. YET YOU HUNT MY LIFE
 TO TAKE IT. LET THE LORD
 JUDGE BETWEEN YOU AND ME,
 AND LET THE LORD AVENGE ME
 ON YOU. BUT MY HAND SHALL
 NOT BE AGAINST YOU."

As Saul was pursuing David once again, he stopped in a cave. What he didn't know was that David and his men were in the deepest part of the cave, and David was able to cut off a corner of Saul's robe without him knowing. When Saul left, David called after him. His argument was that if he were a wicked rebel, against the rule of Saul, then he would have killed Saul when he had the opportunity, but he'd chosen not to. The piece of Saul's robe was proof to Saul that David was not his enemy. David also used the term, "my father," probably not simply out of respect, but as a reminder to the king that he was Saul's son-in-law. Saul seemed to remember that and later gave David's wife, his daughter, to someone else. The Living Bible is clearer in verse 12 when it reads, "Perhaps the Lord will kill you for what

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 BE CAREFUL
 TO SEE
 GOD'S
 HAND IN
 BOTH
 THE
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 AND
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 OF OUR
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you are trying to do to me, but I will never harm you." You would think that would get any person's attention, even a paranoid king like Saul.

This event raises an interesting question for us. Is there anyone in our life who has hurt us or someone we love so much that in a moment of honesty, we might say, "Lord take them. I wish they were gone from my life." Maybe this is an unfair question, since probably everyone has at least one person in their life they wish didn't exist. What is fascinating here is that David had a perfect opportunity to take care of his *problem* but he refused to touch the "Lord's anointed." It was even more tempting because David already had the anointing of God to be king, but he still refused to rush God's timetable. Saul was God's instrument to work on David's life, using Saul to develop David's character, integrity, and complete dependency upon God rather than self. Could it be that God has allowed such people into our lives for the same purposes? We must be careful to see God's hand in both the positive and negative circumstances of our lives, as well as the difficult individuals who cross our paths every day.

"LORD, give us eyes to see You at work in us, even through everything that swirls around us today."

GENESIS 14:16: "SO HE BROUGHT BACK ALL THE GOODS, AND ALSO BROUGHT BACK HIS BROTHER LOT AND HIS GOODS, AS WELL AS THE WOMEN AND THE PEOPLE."

Five Canaanite cities, including Sodom and Gomorrah, had been serving four Mesopotamian kings for twelve years when they decided to rebel. As a result the four Mesopotamian kings came and fought against the five Canaanite kings. The Mesopotamian kings won and took "all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah," including Lot, who was living in Sodom. When Abraham was told of Lot's capture, he took a small army out after them and brought back all the goods and all the people.

It is interesting that Abraham didn't just rescue Lot and all his goods, but he also brought back everything that belonged to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and returned it to them. We see God's mercy and kindness toward these two cities in this. The New Testament reminds us in Romans 2:4, "knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance." When we remember the dreadful future coming to these people of Sodom and Gomorrah, we must also stop and remember the mercy God extended to them. God's servant Abraham had been given power to deliver every one of them, completely. The rescue was inclusive, so why were they not changed? In fact, they only turned to a life even

more full of sin after this rescue; sin so sweeping it required God's intervention.

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What has God rescued and returned us to safety from? It might be wise to think on this and make sure we aren't missing God's kindness that He is extending to us in order to draw us back to Him. Maybe you've heard the story of the atheist who said, "If there is a God, may He prove Himself by striking me dead right now!" When nothing happened to him, he boasted, "See, I told you there is no God!" His friend responded, "My friend, you have only proved that He is a gracious and longsuffering God!" Charles Spurgeon once said:

Notice, dear Friends, that the Lord does not drive you to repentance. Cain was driven away as a fugitive and a vagabond when he had killed his righteous brother Abel. Judas went and hanged himself, being driven by an anguish of remorse because of what he had done in betraying his Lord. But the sweetest and best repentance is that which comes, not by driving, but by drawing—"The goodness of God *leads* to repentance."

Is God leading you right now? He is patiently waiting for you to turn.

"LORD, we do not take Your kindness lightly but graciously thank You for it again this day."

JOHN 5:6-7: "WHEN JESUS SAW HIM LYING THERE, AND KNEW THAT HE ALREADY HAD BEEN IN THAT CONDITION A LONG TIME, HE SAID TO HIM, 'DO YOU WANT TO BE MADE WELL?' THE SICK MAN ANSWERED HIM, 'SIR, I HAVE NO MAN TO PUT ME INTO THE POOL WHEN THE WATER IS STIRRED UP; BUT WHILE I AM COMING, ANOTHER STEPS DOWN BEFORE ME.'"

Jesus saw a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years and asked him a question that at first glance seems strange: "Do you want to be made well?" Most would think the answer was obvious. Or was it? We can safely assume Jesus has never asked a pointless or foolish question. So we must conclude that this man's answer was critical to his circumstances. As strange as it may seem, there are many people who do not want to be healed, even though outwardly they complain about their condition, inwardly they have become familiar and even comfortable with their state. Someone characterized this as getting stuck in fur-lined ruts.

In this man's life, major changes might have been disruptive and required many adjustments. How about your condition? Do you want to be healed of your sin or your addiction? Do you want your marriage or family relationship healed? This man's answer to Jesus' question was as interesting as

"DO YOU
WANT TO
BE MADE
WELL?"

Jesus' question to him. Instead of the expected answer; "Are you kidding? Of course, I'd love it!" He said, "Sir, I have no man." That sounds like, "Man, you don't understand how difficult my problem really is." Instead of just saying, "Yes, Lord," he gave Jesus all the reasons it couldn't possibly happen. He was really saying, "Yes, I want to be healed, but I cannot. I have no hope. It's impossible."

Many have fallen into the trap of this kind of shackled thinking. They have given up all hope of things ever changing, of being healed, restored, or set free. They've resigned themselves to their weakness or addictions. How many times has God wanted to talk with us about a work He wants to do in our lives, but we wanted to talk about all the reasons why things cannot be changed? We need to determine, and then choose, what we really want and what God really wants for our lives. As God's children, we need to say along with the Apostle Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

"LORD, we give You permission to change in us anything and everything You desire to change this day, in Jesus' name."

JOHN 19:5: "THEN JESUS CAME OUT, WEARING THE CROWN OF THORNS AND THE PURPLE ROBE. AND PILATE SAID TO THEM, 'BEHOLD THE MAN!'"

The Roman Procurator Pontius Pilate probably spoke to the crowd in Latin, and in that language this statement was only two words, "Ecce Homo." Little did Pilate know the exact weight of what he said in that moment. From our vantage point in history, looking back, there is a beautiful prophetic symmetry found in this statement. Zechariah had prophesied these same words more than five hundred years earlier: "Thus says the LORD of hosts . . . 'Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH!'" (Zech. 6:12). Twice in Isaiah and twice in Jeremiah the Lord is referred to as "The Branch."

We believe Pilate said this because he was utterly in awe and impressed with Jesus' character. He was saying that they, the crowd, should look carefully at a real man. No doubt the guards had told him how Jesus had silently taken the brutal scourging they had inflicted on Him. Rome had a reputation for routinely using scourging to get confessions and names of accomplices out of their victims. But in this case, the names Jesus would have to have given would be your name and mine.

LOOK AND
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AND ME

Pilate was trying to evoke sympathy from the crowd by displaying Jesus this way. No doubt His face was bruised, bloodied, and swollen. He was wearing the crown of thorns, and, according to the prophecy of Isaiah 53, His beard had been pulled out. We imagine awe in Pilate's voice, meaning, "I have never seen such a man." But this should impact each believer who reads it in a more personal way. "Behold the man" is a command to each and every man, woman, and child alive. We are all commanded to "Behold" or carefully look at and consider this Man and come to a conclusion about who He is. Is He our personal Savior? Have we confessed our sin, turned, and accepted His rule over our life as Lord and Master? Look and see the God-Man who died for you and me.

"Thank You, LORD, that You still desire a personal relationship with broken sinners like us this day. Cleanse us from our sins and use us we ask in Jesus' name."

MARK 15:21: "THEN THEY COMPELLED A CERTAIN MAN, SIMON A CYRENIAN, THE FATHER OF ALEXANDER AND RUFUS, AS HE WAS COMING OUT OF THE COUNTRY AND PASSING BY, TO BEAR HIS CROSS."

After Jesus was beaten and scourged, He was too weak to carry His cross, so the Roman guards randomly recruited a man named Simon out of the watching crowd. Simon was from a Jewish colony in Cyrene, Libya, which is in North Africa. We learn from Acts 6:9 and 13:1, that the Cyrenian Jews had a synagogue in Jerusalem. Mark adds that he was "the father of Alexander and Rufus," which suggests that his children were well known to the church by the time the Gospel of Mark was written.

Simon played a fascinating role here because he was a Jewish pilgrim, coming to Jerusalem from one thousand miles away. Like other pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem at that time, he was there to confess his sins, ask God for forgiveness, and vow to return another year. But he found so much more. The real pilgrimage was not to Jerusalem but to Calvary. Simon became a Messianic pilgrim as he carried the cross of the Lamb of God, and witnessed the sacrifice and shedding not of the imperfect blood of a sacrificial animal but the perfect blood of the once-and-for-all sacrificial Savior. Simon began as a passerby and reluctant

eyewitness, but, by God's grace and design, he became a participant and ultimately a believer.

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There is another true story of an eyewitness who became a believer. British reporter Henry Morton Stanley was sent to Africa by his newspaper editor to find the missing Scottish, medical missionary, David Livingstone. Stanley was the one who famously said, when he finally found him: "Dr. Livingstone, I presume." The life and witness of Livingstone changed Stanley's life; he said:

In 1871 I went to Africa as prejudiced as the biggest atheist in London. But there came for me a long time for reflection. I was out there, away from a worldly world. I saw a solitary old man there, and asked, "Why on earth does he stop here? Is he cracked, or what? What is it that inspires him?" For months after we met I found myself listening to him, wondering at him, as he carried out all that was said in the Bible: "Leave all that ye have and follow me." But little by little his sympathy became contagious. Seeing his piety, his gentleness, his zeal, his earnestness, and how quietly he did his duty, I was converted by him, though he had not tried to do it.¹

"LORD, make our lives today a clear enough witness that someone might see You in us and find salvation."

¹W. Graham Scroggie, *Is the Bible the Word of God* (Philadelphia: The Sunday School Times Company, 1922), p. 92

MATTHEW 27:54: "SO WHEN THE CENTURION AND THOSE WITH HIM, WHO WERE GUARDING JESUS, SAW THE EARTHQUAKE AND THE THINGS THAT HAD HAPPENED, THEY FEARED GREATLY, SAYING, 'TRULY THIS WAS THE SON OF GOD!'"

There is no greater miracle than when God transforms someone, in a heartbeat, from a hardened sinner into a humble saint. This is one of the greatest evidences of the power of Jesus' work on the cross, that those who started the day abusing Jesus ended the day witnesses of His true identity. The capacity of the cross to change humanity is displayed in the reaction of the centurion's heart to what he saw at Calvary. All three of the synoptic Gospels record the life-changing rescue of the centurion on Golgotha that day. Mark records that the centurion was standing opposite Jesus, meaning he was very close, giving him an up close and personal eye view of that world changing crucifixion.

What made him see the goodness of Jesus that day? In part it was because he saw Jesus loving while all the other people were hating. Those who passed by were mocking Him, but Jesus was blessing. One of the two thieves was cursing his executioners, but Jesus was asking for their forgiveness. He could have called ten thousand angels to His rescue, but of course He didn't. In part, it was probably just being that close to God

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the Son at the moment of the great exchange, the sacrifice of His life for ours, that revealed to the centurion that Jesus was indeed the Son of God.

It must have been very troubling to the centurion to only realize the truth after Jesus was dead. We are all very much like the centurion. We also come to the cross only to discover that we ourselves are guilty of crucifying the Son of God. We are responsible for nailing Him to the cross that day, because God the Son died for us! But He rose again, and it is because of His death and resurrection that we can have a personal relationship with God right now, and will spend eternity with Him. May the weight of that amazing truth never fail to drive us to our knees in worship and thanksgiving!

"LORD, we worship You, the God of Love, with our lives this day."

JOHN 20:1: "NOW THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK MARY MAGDALENE WENT TO THE TOMB EARLY, WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK, AND SAW THAT THE STONE HAD BEEN TAKEN AWAY FROM THE TOMB."

None of Jesus' disciples believed He would rise from the dead. So when Mary went early in the morning and found the empty tomb, she thought someone had stolen Jesus' body. She didn't believe or even think He might have risen. When John and Peter came to the tomb, John saw that it was empty and believed. Peter saw the same thing John did, but he didn't believe that morning and walked away. But Mary came back. She looked again and believed. Three different witness to the empty tomb. All three saw the same tomb, had the same experience, but responded differently. Why? Because they were three different, unique people.

John loved Jesus, so it didn't take much to move him. There are some people reading this who have that same testimony. It didn't take much for you to step into a relationship with God. And God bless you. I'm jealous of that relationship. Some of us are like Peter: we look, we scratch our heads, and we walk away. And if you're in that shape, just keep coming. God will speak to you eventually. That's what happened to Mary. She came back to the tomb, and then Jesus Himself

ASK HIM
TO SPEAK
TO YOU

spoke to her. If you're like Mary and you're waiting for the Lord to speak to you personally, He will do it. Ask Him to speak to you in the way that *you*, uniquely, not anybody else, will understand. Only Mary understood that it was Jesus talking to her. It was personal to her. And it changed her life for eternity.

"LORD, we thank You that You know us and meet us where we are."

Pastor Ed Rea has been the senior pastor of The Packinghouse Christian Fellowship in Redlands, California for more than two decades. You can hear and watch his teaching by web cast on the church web site at www.thepackinghouse.org or at www.hischannel.com. He can also be seen live by streaming webcast on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings. And his radio program and podcasts can be found through his radio web site, www.grow_in_grace.com or on iTunes.

He and his wife RaeLynn served as missionaries in both Western Europe and behind the Iron Curtain in the mid-1970s. They have two daughters, Jen and Wendy. Ed spent thirteen years as a senior biochemist in hospital clinical laboratories as well as five years as a research biochemist with a major pharmaceutical company. He has studied and served throughout Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East sharing the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ.

